

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-01 INR-07 L-03
NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06 OMB-01
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P R 241628Z FEB 77
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3149
INFO AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
AMEMBASSY AMMAN
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
USCINCEUR
COMSIXTHFLT

C O N F I D E N T I A L BEIRUT 0827

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PFOR, LE, US, IS, MOPS
SUBJECT: SITUATION IN SOUTHERN LEBANON

1. SITUATION IN SOUTHERN LEBANON REMAINS CHAOTIC.
FROM OUR LOCAL CONVERSATIONS AND INTELLIGENCE
REPORTS, SEVERAL THREADS EMERGE:

A. ISRAELIS AND CHRISTIAN REMNANT OF LEBANESE
ARMY SEEM BENT ON CREATION OF CORDON SANITAIRE FROM
AREA OF HASBAYYA, ALONG LEBANESE-ISRAEL BORDER TO
SEA. WE ARE TOLD THAT, IN REACTION TO PALESTINIAN
EXCESSES, SOME SHIA AND SUNNI MUSLIMS OF AREA ARE
BEGINNING TO JOIN CHRISTIANS IN THIS EFFORT AND THAT
DRUZE OF HASBAYYA AREA MAY ALSO COOPERATE, ONCE
THEY ARE CONVINCED CHRISTIANS ARE WINNING.

B. ISRAELIS AND CHRISTIANS MEANWHILE SHELLING
NABATIYA INDISCRIMINATELY, AND SOME 100 MEN OF
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INTERNAL SECURITY FORCES SENT THERE AS ACT OF
PRESENCE UNABLE EVEN TO ATTEMPT TO CONTROL
HOODLUMS OF VARIOUS FACTIONS TERRORIZING POPULATION.

C. PALESTINIANS SEEM TO BE IN SOME DISARRAY
THEMSELVES, BUT WE SUSPECT THEY HAVE CONSIDERABLE
FIGHTING POTENTIAL. CERTAINLY THEY ARE WELL ARMED.

WE DO NOT HAVE AN IMPRESSION OF MUCH COORDINATED MILITARY ACTIVITY ON THEIR PART, BUT LOCAL POPULATION CONTINUES BE DESPERATELY UNHAPPY WITH THEIR PRESENCE ACCORDING TO ALL REPORTS. THERE APPARENTLY IS NO LAW SOUTH OF SIDON.

2. LEBANESE GOVERNMENT CONTINUES UNABLE DO ANYTHING CONTROL SITUATION. MINISTER OF INTERIOR SALMAN YESTERDAY TOLD ME HE POWERLESS AND THAT MATTER WAS IN HANDS OF PRESIDENT AND FOREIGN MINISTER, WHO WEEKING SOLUTION THROUGH DIPLOMATIC CHANNELS.

SALMAN IS APPARENTLY TRYING TO SHOVE PROBLEM UNDER RUG SO THAT IT WILL NOT DISTRACT HIM FROM HIS OTHER RESPONSIBILITIES. SIMILAR RATHER VACUOUS REMARK BY PIERRE GEMAYEL TO EFFECT IT IS UP TO U.S. AND SOVIETS TO SOLVE PROBLEM ILLUSTRATES DURABILITY OF LOCAL ATTITUDES AND MYTHS ABOUT FOREIGN POWERS.

3. SAW FOREIGN MINISTER BOUTROS MORNING FEB 23 FOR TOUR D'HORIZON, MUCH OF WHICH DEVOTED TO SOUTH. HE HAD TO LEAVE MEETING AFTER HALF HOUR TO DISCUSS SAME SUBJECT WITH PRESIDENT SARKIS, AND SEEMED AT THAT POINT TO HAVE NO IDEAS FOR SOLUTION, DIPLOMATIC OR OTHERWISE.

4. THERE HAS BEEN GOOD DEAL OF GOING AND COMING BY VARIOUS PERSONALITIES, FROM MARONITE PATRIARCH
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TO IMAM MUSA SADR, WHO ARE VISITING EACH OTHER, THE PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC, ETC., ALL TALKING ABOUT GRAVITY OF SITUATION AND NEED FOR SOME SORT OF ACTION, BUT NO ONE OFFERING TO DO MUCH. I SUSPECT SARKIS IS GOING TO FOLLOW RAY HARE'S ADVICE AND MAINTAIN POSTURE OF ALERT INACTION, WAITING TO SEE HOW CONTEST DEVELOPS ON GROUND.

5. THIS IS ABOUT ALL SARKIS CAN DO AT PRESENT, IN ANY EVENT, AND IT IS POSSIBLE COMBATANTS WILL IN TIME RUN OUT OF AMMUNITION AND ENERGY AND AREA WILL REACH STABLE EQUILIBRIUM BETWEEN OPPOSING FORCES. THERE IS, HOWEVER, POTENTIAL FOR SERIOUS DONNYBROOK EVENTUALLY INVOLVING EVERYONE-- SYRIANS, LEBANESE, PALESTINIANS AND ISRAELIS. IF, AS MINISTER OF HEALTH ALLEGES, THERE ARE 300,000 PALESTINIANS IN AREA IN AND AROUND AND SOUTH OF SIDON, AND IF MY MILITARY ATTACHE'S ESTIMATE THAT 7,000 OF THEM ARE ARMED FIGHTING MEN IS CORRECT,

IT SEEMS EVIDENT THAT THEY HAVE NOT PUT ANYTHING LIKE
THEIR FULL WEIGHT INTO BATTLE, PRESUMABLY
BECAUSE THEY ARE BEING RESTRAINED BY PLO.
INCIDENT SUCH AS SUDDEN SYRIAN MOVE AGAINST SABRA
AND CHATILA CAMPS NEAR BEIRUT COULD PROVIDE
CATALYST WHICH WOULD START REACTION LEADING TO
DESPERATE, ORGANIZED MILITARY INITIATIVE BY
PALESTINIANS. LEBANESE SOUTH TODAY LOOKS
INCREASINGLY LIKE THEIR MASSADA. WE NOT WILLING TO
PREDICT WHOM THEY WOULD REACT AGAINST, BUT
RESULT WOULD BE BLOODY.

6. WOULD APPRECIATE HAVING UPDATE OF ISRAELI
CIVILIAN AS WELL AS MILITARY EVALUATION OF SITUATION
IN AREA.
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Disposition Approved on Date:
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